

The Impact of Reading Success Academy on High School Reading Achievement

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Abstract

The study explores the effectiveness of the Reading Success Academy on the reading achievement of the selected group of ninth-grade students in a comprehensive high school. We examine in what ways the Reading Success Academy may improve the reading proficiency rates and amount of reading growth of ninth-grade students.

The results indicate that the implemented Reading Success Academy intervention was not found to be effective in increasing the reading achievement levels of the selected students at the target high school. Statistical analysis revealed that there was no significant increase in student reading achievement and reading growth between the treatment and control groups. Recommendations include the sample size of participants should expand to 50 participants and the length of the intervention to 16 weeks. Some of the selected students did not respond to initial teacher instructions and struggled to acquire reading skills that were needed to perform at a proficient level as measured by standardized testing. Recommendations include curricula should include explicit, systematic instruction approaches that are effective for students that need additional instruction in reading skills that bring them on grade level.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the Reading Success Academy on the reading achievement of the selected group of ninth-grade students in a comprehensive high school in the south-east. We examined if participation in the Reading Success Academy could improve the reading proficiency and reading growth of ninth-grade students.

The Reading Success Academy was an academic skills intervention program that utilizes research-based instructional practices specifically designed for low achieving students in small-group instructional sessions.

The program intervention was implemented by the school district because it was cost effective and specifically was designed for relatively long term improved reading results. The skills that were taught throughout the sessions of this program improved higher order processing, reading comprehension, and problem solving. The Reading Success Academy was developed to focus, guide, and shape the thought processes of students when completing reading lessons. The administration at the high school selected the Reading Success Academy as the instructional reading intervention to help students achieve the goal of reading proficiency. The reading strategies were tailored to individual student reading needs through the use of the social studies core curriculum based on student reading data. The objective of the Reading Success Academy and small-group instructional activities was to provide instructional literacy support to nonproficient ninth-grade students in an effort to improve their reading proficiency levels.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1

Did participation in the Reading Success Academy significantly improve the reading proficiency levels and reading numbers of high school students who have become nonproficient readers compared to high school students who did not participate in the Reading Success Academy and who have also become nonproficient readers?

Research Question 2

Did participation in the Reading Success Academy significantly improve the amount of reading achievement growth of high school students who have become nonproficient readers compared to high school students who did not participate in the Reading Success Academy and who have also become nonproficient readers?

Literature Review

Research has shown that when adolescent students have reading difficulties, their ability and desire to learn how to read is negatively affected, as well as their desire to read for pleasure. Secondary students who receive explicit reading instruction with adequate time and intensity improved their reading ability (Vaughn, Cirino, Wanzek, Wexler, Fletcher, Dentón, & Francis, 2010). The objective of the Reading Success Academy was designed to assist struggling readers who need academic assistance to improve their reading achievement levels on standardized assessments, which is supported by research (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

Unrau (2008) believes that small-group instruction provides students with the opportunity to inquire and reflect to deepen their understanding, word recognition, and reading fluency because they participate in asking higher order and rigorous questioning that elicits their thinking and interpretations of the text. The small-group lessons in the Reading Success Academy were implemented each week for approximately 6 to 8 weeks. These particular skills were measured on the standardized tests and attempts to fill in the identified gaps in research and practice with persistent learning difficulties in high school students. The skills were aimed to assist students in decoding words and processing text, using cognitive resources and background knowledge, and higher order thinking.

It was anticipated that the reading proficiency of the treatment group participants would significantly improve to grade level reading achievement and growth, when compared to the reading proficiency levels of the control group participants. Second, it was anticipated that the instructional method and delivery of the Reading Success Academy would significantly improve reading achievement and proficiency levels among high school students. Third, it was anticipated that the selected high school would review the impact of the results of the Reading Success Academy and incorporate similar small-group instructional interventions for students in additional grade levels to increase reading proficiency and reading growth.

In a small-group teaching environment, teachers understand student reading characteristics and develop specific strategies that are needed to address individual strengths and weaknesses based on student interests, abilities, and the reading problem (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2011). Small-group instruction allows learning to become differentiated by assessing and evaluating student successes related to state academic goals and standards (Fisher et al., 2011).

Research has shown that there is a positive correlation between small-group reading instruction and an increase in student reading achievement levels (Ediger, 2010; Tyner & Green, 2005). Small-group instruction can produce

sustained improvement in student reading achievement, especially if the small groups focus on explicit, interactive instruction in the core areas of literacy (Tyner, 2009).

Allington (2011) stated that in order to advance the literacy achievement of students, higher academic standards must be established in secondary schools to ensure better reading achievement and produce skilled graduates who are ready to succeed at college and in the current workplace. At the early stages of reading, one of the primary objectives for teachers was to use research-based instructional practices and engage students in small-group learning experiences to teach children how to read (Fisher et al., 2011). Research has shown that reading skills are critically important for children starting at a young age as good young readers are more likely to succeed in secondary subject areas when reading motivation and effective teaching are required (Galda, 2010; Melekoglu, 2011).

The Reading Intervention

The core instructional components of the Reading Success Academy consisted of a focus lesson, mini-lesson, and an instructional passage. During each small-group session, the instructional processes consisted of the three reading stages of pre, during, and post-reading strategies. All of the students were responsible for completing all the required pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities for each lesson.

According to Yusuf (2011), pre-reading strategies help prepare students for learning by activating their prior knowledge about the topic that is featured in various texts and motivating them to continue reading about the topic. The various pre-reading strategies that were utilized by teachers included predicting the content, completing anticipation guides, previewing and clarifying text features, and setting a purpose for reading to improve student engagement (Wangsgard, 2010).

Post-reading activities connect old and new information and knowledge to help students apply it to their learning (Key et al., 2010). Post-reading strategies capitalized on the connections that the students made from the selected passage by posing any questions that were raised by the reading material. The strategies encouraged students to revisit earlier predictions, analyze or evaluate a portion of the passage, and build upon key ideas or connections.

Methodology

A post-hoc research design with a quasi-experimental approach was utilized in this study. This design involved selecting groups when the variable was tested without a true random selection process (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). A quasi-experimental design was integrated with individual case studies where the data and results were analyzed to reinforce the findings.

Setting

In an effort to improve reading achievement at the selected high school, the Reading Success Academy was implemented for ninth-grade students at the high school who were no longer proficient readers. The Reading Success Academy consisted of small-group instructional sessions that were implemented by the high school over an eight-week period during the 2011-2012 school year. The participating ninth-grade students in the Reading Success Academy were pulled from their social studies classes three times a week throughout the eight-week period and integrated the social studies curriculum with Reading Success Academy instructional strategies. This was the first time that the selected high school had implemented the Reading Success Academy during the school day to improve the reading achievement of students who were previously proficient in reading but became nonproficient in reading based on formative diagnostic assessments. The selected students who participated in the Reading Success Academy received instructional support to help prepare them for the 2012 reading FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test).

Subjects

The participants consisted of ninth-grade students who were enrolled at the selected high school and were no longer proficient in reading based on eighth-grade and ninth-grade FCAT scores. A total of 215 ninth-grade students (30% of the class) achieved reading proficiency on the eighth-grade reading FCAT but then were not proficient on the winter reading FCAT diagnostic test. Therefore, it was anticipated that approximately 200 to 250 ninth-grade students composed the 2011-2012 ninth-grade sample population that was used to select the treatment and control groups of students.

Data Collection

Multiple types of quantitative data were collected to answer the research questions. The primary sources of data consisted of quantitative reading achievement level and reading growth data that analyzed after the Reading Success Academy.

The student reading achievement level data that were collected for **Research Question 1** consisted of predicted FCAT reading levels that were achieved by ninth-grade students on the 2011-2012 winter reading FCAT diagnostic test and the FCAT reading levels that were achieved by ninth-grade students on the 2012 reading FCAT. The student reading growth data that were collected for **Research Question 2** consisted of the student DSS that were achieved by ninth-grade students on the 2011-2012 winter reading FCAT diagnostic test and the DSS that were achieved by ninth-grade students on the 2011-2012 reading FCAT.

Data Analysis

In order to address whether participation in the Reading Success Academy was effective in increasing student reading proficiency levels (**Research Question 1**) the Mann-Whitney nonparametric statistical test was utilized.

In order to address whether participation in the Reading Success Academy was effective in increasing student reading growth (**Research Question 2**), an independent t test was utilized. The level of statistical significance for both tests was $p < .05$.

Findings

Research Question 1

Did participation in the Reading Success Academy significantly improve the reading proficiency levels of high school students who have become nonproficient readers compared to high school students who did not participate in the Reading Success Academy and who have also become nonproficient readers?

The 2011-2012 reading FCAT was the post-treatment assessment used to determine if participation in the Reading Success Academy improved the reading achievement among control and treatment groups. **Table 1** shows that following participation in the Reading Success Academy, 50% of the treatment group subjects improved their reading achievement from the winter diagnostic test and demonstrated reading proficiency on the 2011-2012 reading FCAT. Comparatively, 70% of the control group subjects improved their reading achievement from the winter diagnostic test and demonstrated reading proficiency on the 2011-2012 reading FCAT.

Table 1

Reading FCAT 2011-2012 Achievement Levels: <i>Treatment vs. Control Group</i>					
<u>Treatment group</u>			<u>Control group</u>		
Level	<i>N</i>	Percent		<i>N</i>	Percent
1	0	0.0		1	5.0
2	10	50.0		5	25.0
3	7	35.0		10	50.0
4	3	15.0		4	20.0

The result of the statistical analysis ($Z = .323, p < .05$) reveals that there was no significant difference between the treatment and control groups in regards to an increase in proficiency levels on the 2011-2012 reading FCAT.

Research Question 2

Did participation in the Reading Success Academy significantly improve the amount of reading achievement growth of high school students who have become non-proficient readers compared to high school students who did not participate in the Reading Success Academy and who have also become non-proficient readers?

Table 2 outlines the statistical descriptive data for the treatment and control groups related to the amount of reading growth achieved on the 2011-2012 reading FCAT. The data shows that the reading growth mean scale score difference was higher for the treatment group than it was for the control group.

Table 2

<i>Reading Growth Mean Scale Score Difference: Treatment vs. Control Group</i>				
Group	Mean	N	SD	SEM
Treatment	3.20	20	11.414	2.552
Control	.70	20	11.457	2.562

The result of the statistical test ($t = .494, p < .05$) reveals that there was no significant difference in the amount of reading growth achieved by the treatment group subjects on the 2012 reading FCAT compared to the amount of reading growth achieved by the control group subjects on the 2012 reading FCAT. The statistical result indicates that subject participation in the Reading Success Academy did not have a significant impact on the amount of reading growth that was achieved by the participating subjects.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that the implemented Reading Success Academy intervention was not found to be effective in increasing the reading achievement levels of the selected students at the target high school. Several implications emerged following the analysis related to the reading intervention that can help explain the study results. The results of **Research Question 1** showed that there was no statistical relative increase in reading proficiency between the treatment group and the control group as a whole. The treatment group and the control group of

this applied dissertation study both increased reading proficiency by at least one level during the period of measurement. The data showed that one participant in the control group decreased by 1 point in the reading proficiency level.

Regarding **Research Question 2**, 40% of the treatment group increased more than 6 points in reading growth and 35% of the control group increased by 6 points or more. Both the treatment and control groups decreased 55% of the reading growth based on the 2012 FCAT. The collected data indicated that this implementation solution was not statistically different based on the t test as a group. The data indicate that there is not a statistical difference between the treatment and control groups but a significant difference within the reading growth scale scores. The treatment group shows significantly higher, as much as 5 times higher, achievement growth. In this applied dissertation study, the Level 1 participants started on a lower level of reading proficiency compared to the Level 2 students which had more of a growth opportunity. The Level 1 treatment group had the most room for improvement; therefore, they contributed the greatest difference of reading growth.

A reading pull-out program such as the Reading Success Academy does not guarantee improvement results in student reading achievement. It is important that school administrators consider possible adaptations that would be needed for non-proficient readers. It is evident that some of the selected students did not respond to initial teacher instruction and struggled to acquire reading skills that were needed to perform at a proficient level.

We recommend that curricula include explicit, systematic instruction approaches that are effective for students that need remediation in reading skills that bring them to grade level. For students that did not meet proficient levels, intervention programs should provide a great deal of support and scaffolding during the first phases of instruction. The intent of scaffolding is to lead learners to an independent skill level with the least amount of confusion and error along the way (Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008). Although the concept of a reading pull-out program can be a thoroughly developed intervention, the instructional environment must be conducive so that the teachers providing the instruction are willing to make the necessary requirements to assist, accommodate, and rearrange skills in a more appropriate order to meet the needs of struggling readers within the high school day.

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